

The Scottish Dirk in New Zealand

Researched & compiled by Dr John Osborne DTT, PhD, FSG

The Scottish Dirk evolved in about 1600 from the medieval ballock dagger which was a large stabbing knife designed to pierce armour, with a sharply-pointed thick, heavy blade. The one piece wooden handle (reinforced on top with a metal washer riveted to the tang) had two oval swellings resembling male genitalia, forming a guard between the handle and blade. The Ballock dagger (refer image below) was popular in England, Flanders, Ireland and Scotland between the 13th and 17th centuries, especially during Tudor times, a large number were found on the wreck of the Mary Rose

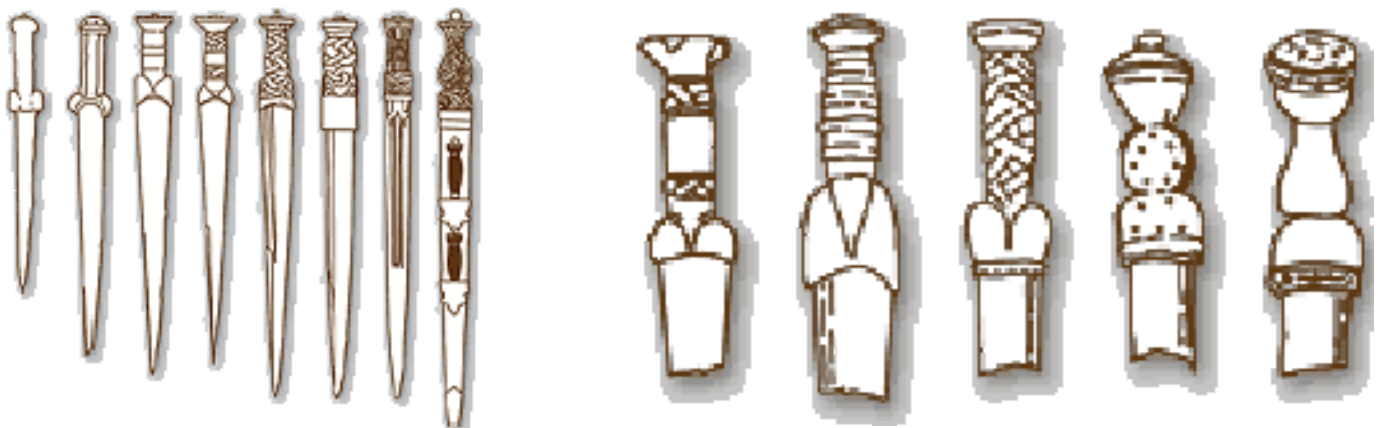


The first Scottish Dirks retained the ballocks but developed a wide, flaring pommel capped by a circular brass disk. The handle was carved from ivy root or boxwood root, usually cylindrical in shape, with grooves or one or two bands of Celtic knot-work carved around it. The entire surface of the handle began to be richly carved with deep Celtic interlace patterns. The Dirk was carried in a leather sheath hanging from the waist belt, usually worn in the front center, with the point dangling between the legs. It sometimes had a single "by-knife," or utility knife with a five or six inch blade, carried in a pocket on the outside of the sheath.

By 1700 a broader but thinner spear point blade evolved, more suited for general-purpose cutting, the single by-knife was reduced in size to around a four inch blade, and a matching two tined fork was incorporated into the sheath. Initially this eating knife and fork were mounted side-by-side in the sheath, with their handles just below the handle of the dirk. Later, the eating knife and fork were moved one above the other on the outside of the dirk sheath.

After the Battle at Culloden in 1746 all arms were forbidden to the Highlanders, and even the bagpipes were classed as a weapon of war. The Scots were tough, and good fighters so the dirk, kilt and targe (shield) lived on in the Highland regiments which began to be formed in the British Army. One regiment which rapidly became famous was the Black Watch, which fought successfully in America during the French and Indian War of the 1750's. In 1782 the English proscription against Highland weapons and dress was repealed.

From about 1800 the bold knotwork carving changed into a shallow basket weave pattern, Pommels remained large and became highly decorated with engraving and/or three dimensional metal castings, many began to be mounted with agates or "cairn" stones, smoky quartz or citrines from the Cairn Mountains of Scotland. They were no longer made only by clan smiths in the Highlands, but by cutlers in Edinburgh and Glasgow, and by famous names in England such as Joseph Rogers since 1682, John Nowill & Sons since 1700, Wilkinson Sword since 1772 and George Wostenholm - I*XL since 1787. The Scottish dirk continued to evolve and with the English fighting dirk, Naval dirk and in America the Bowie Knife from the 1830s.



Evolution of the Scottish Dirk from the ballock dagger L to R: c1550-1600, early 17th century, early 18th century, c1790, c1810-1880

In its early days in Scotland and Ireland the Dirk was considered to be a sword. Its blade length and style varied, but it was generally 7-14 inches. However, the blades of Irish versions often were as much as 21 inches in length. In medieval Scotland, the dirk was a backup to the broadsword, and was wielded by the left hand while the shield was carried on the arm. Dirks were used to swear an oath upon in Celtic cultures. Nearly every Scottish male at the time of the oath had a dirk. This was because most Scots were too poor to buy a sword. The dirk was small and was carried everywhere the owner went. The dirk was worn in plain view suspended from a belt at the waist. In addition other styles of dirk were worn on land and sea. Easier to carry than swords, dirks gained favor as lighter and shorter side arms with many military and naval officers during the 17th through 19th centuries. In the British Royal Navy they continued to be worn by midshipmen and cadets well into the 20th century. Numerous examples of naval dirks have survived from the age of sail, some with histories of use during naval engagements. Dirks can have single-edged blades that may also have an edge near the tip, a feature that was useful in a back cut, others are double-edged. There was no standard blade configuration.



19th Century Scottish Dirks 8" 10" & 11½" blades with eating knife and fork.



21st Century Scottish Dirk 12" blade made by John Nowill & Sons, 2008.

In 1833 James Busby a Scot, was appointed British Resident in New Zealand (New Zealand was at that time an independent country) He settled at Waitangi and planted New Zealand's first vineyard. Many of the first settlers to New Zealand from the late 1820s were Scots bringing with them their traditional dress and arms. In 1863 during the Maori Wars New Zealand Colonial Volunteer Units were formed including the Forest Rangers of whom 31 were born in Scotland to supplement British Regiments. British regulars had shown little aptitude for guerilla bush warfare and consequently were at a disadvantage. The Dirk, Scottish and English types and the American Bowie knife are all known to have been carried by Forest Rangers and from 1867 some members of the Armed Constabulary Field Force. In 1865 New Zealand had adopted a Self Reliant Policy undertaking all the front line fighting and frontier and coastal protection employing only New Zealand Colonial Forces.



Right; unknown Constable (centre of image at left) of the New Zealand Armed Constabulary Field Force at Parihaka, Taranaki 1881 with his about 8" blade short Dirk fitted with what appears to be a Scottish basket weave carved handle,

and 25 bore Snider Short Rifle (bayonet bar on band, referred to in NZ Colonial records as a Sword Rifle). Although not showing he would most-likely also been carrying on his waist belt a pattern 1875 saw back sword bayonet with an 18" blade (often mistaken as a huge Dirk or Bowie knife) and an Adams .450" caliber 6 chamber revolver. Image courtesy Alexander Turnbull Library



Dunedin Scottish Rifles Highland Band c1880s armed with Dirks and Sgian Dubh (small knives tucked in to the outside of right hand sock) wearing the Tartan and Sporran of the Black Watch.



New Zealand Scottish Rifles in Dunedin c1880s linked to the Black Watch and wearing the Black Watch Tartan and Sporran, armed with Snider Enfield Carbines and Yattagan sword bayonets, Officers with Dirks, Sgian Dubh and basket hilted broadswords.

Dunedin Highlanders strike a defensive pose at a Volunteer Demonstration in 1900, in the 'Edinburgh of the South'.



Dunedin Highlanders 1900, armed with .303" Long Martini Enfield Rifles and Socket triangular Bayonets, officers armed with Broadswords, Dirks and Sgian Dubh, All wearing the uniform and sporran of the Black Watch

The New Zealand Scottish Regiment (linked to the Black Watch - Royal Highland Regiment) was first raised 17 January 1939 as an infantry territorial unit where all members had to be of Scottish descent. New Zealand Infantry Battle Honours in The Second World War: Mount Olympus, Aliakmon Bridge, Tempe Gorge, Elasson, Greece 1941, Crete, Galatas, Canea, 42nd Street, Withdrawal to Sphakia, Middle East 1941-44, Tobruk 1941, Sidi Azeiz, Zemla, Bardia 1942, Defence of Alamein Line, Ruweisat Ridge, El Mreir, Alam el Halfa, El Alamein, El Agheila, Nofilia, Advance to Tripoli, Medinine, Tebaga Gap, Point 201 (Roman Wall), El Hamma, Enfidaville, Djebibine, North Africa 1940-43, The Sangro, Castel Frentano, Orsogna, Cassino I, Advance to Florence, Cerbaia, San Michele, Paula Line, St Angelo in Salute, Pisciatello, Bologna, Sillaro Crossing, Italy 1943-45, and in the South Pacific 1942-44. In 1949 it was reformed as the 1st Divisional Regiment (RNZAC), a mixed regular and territorial force unit and later 1st Armoured Car Regiment (NZ Scottish). First Colours were presented in 1963 New Zealand Scottish Regiment. The regiment is unique as the only armoured unit in NZ to carry Colours instead of a Guidon.



Left; The New Zealand Scottish Regiment Pipe Band 1954-55. Formed from the CMT 7th intake Pipers and Drummers from around New Zealand, all wearing the uniform and sporran of the Black Watch, Courtesy Bob Scott; fifth second row right Right; WWII hat badge New Zealand Scottish Regiment.



Left; A Daimler Mk II armoured car (NZ28807) of B Squadron 1 Armoured Car Regiment during a training exercise in the 1950s. The vehicle was completed in overall bronze green and the tac sign consists of a square red over yellow divided diagonally and the unit serial number was 31. The B Squadron insignia was white.
 Second: A Ferret Mk II scout car (NZ30876) of 1st Reconnaissance Squadron (NZ Scottish) at Balmoral Camp, Tekapo in the mid 1960s. The unit serial number was 5 in horizontally divided square, red over white. It also carries the Kiwi formation sign
 Third; An M113A1 APC (NZ33170) of 1 Scots in the snow at Tekapo in 1977. The vehicle was completed in olive drab overall. The tac sign was still 5 in the red over yellow square. 1 Scots vehicles also had a stylised cap badge on the side with the letter 1 inside and named their vehicles with Scottish names, such as this one MacBeth.
 Right: From 1978 onwards all vehicles were repainted in the MERDC Red Desert scheme (NZ32503, MacIntyre) in 1988 at Waiouru. The unit serial number was changed to 72 in the early 1980s. (R J Fleming)



Traditional Dress or Pipers jewel top 12" blade Dirk with jewel top eating knife & fork, with matching jewel top 3 5/8" blade Sgian Dubh, resting on traditional New Zealand Military Sporrans, Officers left, O/Rs right, both same as Royal Highland Regiment – "Black Watch"

The Dirk has been in continuous use and wear since the early 1600s and it is still considered high fashion to wear a Dirk as part of Highland Dress to any formal occasion in New Zealand

Special thanks and Acknowledgements to:

Joe D. Huddleston, www.sheffieldknives.co.uk Maggie Richards, www.maryrose.org

Grant Sheriff FSG, Hon Curator Arms, Otago Museum; www.otagomuseum.govt.nz

www.regiments.org/regiments/uk/inf/042Black.htm

Osborne Arms Museum, armsmuseum@xtra.co.nz John Plowman, www.kiwisinarmour.hobbyvista.com

Bob Scott, Piper New Zealand Scottish Regiment, pipe Band 1954-55



Image Courtesy www.tartansauthority.com ;

C1900 Black Watch Officer and Piper in full dress Uniform armed with Dirk and Sgian Dubh, NCO armed with .303" Lee Enfield Magazine Rifle and 12" blade knife bayonet. The Black Watch Uniform was adopted by the Auckland, Wellington and Dunedin Highland Rifles c1885 and the New Zealand Scottish Regiment from c1939



The Jacobite Rebellion of 1745, Highlanders armed with Broad Swords, Dirks and Targe (shield)
Image Courtesy www.tartansauthority.com

The Black Watch (*Reicudan Dhu*) were raised as a militia in 1725 to occupy and keep peace in the Scottish Highlands, members were recruited from local clans. The Regiment of the Line was formed officially in 1739 as the 42nd Highland Regiment of Foot and first mustered in 1740. The regiment's first full combat was the Battle of Fontenoy in Flanders in 1745, where they surprised the French with their ferocity. When the 1745 Jacobite Rebellion broke out, the regiment returned to the south of Britain in anticipation of a possible French invasion. From 1747 to 1756 they were stationed in Ireland and then were sent to New York and fought in the French and Indian War. In the Battle of Fort Carillon in 1758 the regiment lost over half its men. In the American Revolutionary War the Black Watch fought in the Battles of Long Island, Brandywine, German Town, Monmouth, the Siege of Charleston and the final Battle of Yorktown returning to Glasgow in 1790. Since then Black Watch have fought alongside American regiments in WWI, WWII, Desert Storm and Iraqi Freedom. After the Battle at Culloden in 1746 all weapons were forbidden to the Highlanders, and even the bagpipes and tartan were classed as a weapon of war. The Scots were a tough, combative people and good fighters. The dirk, kilt and targe (shield) lived on in the Highland regiments which began to be formed in the English Army. One regiment which rapidly became famous was the Black Watch, which fought successfully in America during the French and Indian War of the 1750's. In 1782 the English proscription against Highland weapons and dress was repealed.